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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000618

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [UNGA](#) [SA](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: TEN-HOUR CABINET MEETING ON HIZBALLAH'S
AIRPORT CAMERA, NEW UNSCR, MINIMUM WAGE

REF: A. BEIRUT 523
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 601

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Acting Foreign Minister Tareq Mitri briefed the Charge on the previous night's ten-hour marathon Cabinet meeting. Since the Cabinet has not had a quorum for the last two weeks, the 267-item agenda took five hours to work through, including a lengthy discussion on the merits of a new United Nations Security Council resolution, and the rest of the early morning hours were spent deciding how to respond to recent reports of Hizballah's monitoring cameras stationed at Beirut International Airport and its fiber optic network. They decided to remove the head of the airport security, declare Hizballah's actions illegal, and inform the UN, Arab League, and other relevant international organizations. The Cabinet also decided to raise the minimum wage by 50 percent, although it anticipates the strikes will still go on as scheduled for May 7. End summary.

FAVOR NEW UNSCR ONLY IF STRONG LANGUAGE
AND HIGH PROBABILITY OF BEING PASSED

[1](#)2. (C) The Charge, accompanied by PolOff, met with Acting Foreign Minister and Cultural Affairs Minister Tareq Mitri on May 6 for a briefing on the ten-hour marathon Cabinet session which did not end until four a.m. earlier the same day. Mitri reported that he led the Cabinet in a 40-minute discussion on the merits of a new UN Security Council resolution on Lebanon and on whether to hold a public debate on the 1559 report, based upon his recent trip to New York.

[1](#)3. (C) Mitri reported to us that during his trip the previous week Ambassador Khalilzad asked him for his opinion on whether there should be a public debate on 1559 and whether there should be a new resolution. Mitri told him he found the public debate problematic because it meant Iran, Syria, and Israel could make unhelpful interventions. He added that it is the privilege of the SC president, who is currently from the UK, to decide the issue, and that the UK is uninterested in a public debate. It was UN Envoy Terje Roed Larsen, Mitri suggested, who is pushing for a public debate because it could attract valuable media attention.

[1](#)4. (C) Mitri said Khalilzad then showed him the draft resolution, and Mitri told us he found that it fell short of previous resolutions such as 1680. Mitri said if the draft

resolution could be strengthened, it might have a chance of moving forward. He did not offer any alternate language.

¶15. (C) He reported that the GOL had done its own consultations with the Europeans, saying that France and the UK told him it was impossible to get the nine votes required. He added that Belgium opposed the idea because expectations would be raised, and failure to meet them would be a diplomatic setback. Mitri said he, as well as the Cabinet, concluded that if the resolution contained stronger language and if there was a very strong possibility to secure ten to eleven votes, then the GOL would support a new resolution.

DECLARING HIZBALLAH'S ACTIONS
"ILLEGAL"

¶16. (C) After spending five hours working through the 267-item agenda, the Cabinet focused on how to respond to recent reports of Hizballah's fiber optics network and its monitoring cameras set up at Beirut International Airport (Refs A, B). On the fiber optics network, Mitri said the Cabinet is not willing to go as far as to request the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to "cut the lines" because it would be considered an act of war by Hizballah.

¶17. (C) Instead, Mitri reported, the Cabinet agreed to send an official communication to the UN Secretary General containing documentation of the network including detailed maps. Mitri said that he expects the SYG to ask UN Envoy Larsen to mention the issue in his briefing on the status of 1559's

BEIRUT 00000618 002 OF 002

implementation. The GOL will also inform the Arab League and relevant international organizations, Mitri said.

¶18. (C) Mitri reported that the Cabinet's drafted statement contained strong language, calling the fiber optics network "illegal and a violation of state sovereignty." The statement also calls upon the Lebanese security forces to stop those who are extending the network.

¶19. (C) Mitri remarked that the pro-Syrian and Hizballah press reported that the GOL had already sent its request to the UN and accused the GOL of internationalizing the issue. He commented that he was surprised Hizballah had not yet responded to the Cabinet's decision, speculating that Hizballah had not anticipated such a strong decision. (Note: During the meeting, Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah made a public statement that Hizballah will hold a press conference on May 8 to discuss the latest decisions taken by the government. End note.)

¶10. (C) The airport cameras required a longer discussion to decide if anyone should be held accountable, Mitri explained. Ultimately, he reported, the Cabinet chose to remove Brigadier General Wafiq Shuqayr as the head of airport security and relocate him back to the LAF. According to Mitri, the general is a "nobody" who had made a number of mistakes, and while a Shia Muslim, he is not a member of Hizballah. Mitri blamed Shuqayr for negligence rather than maliciousness, adding that he was often drunk at eight in the morning, and is now being used as Hizballah's scapegoat.

¶11. (C) Mitri said the decision was challenging because the Cabinet was concerned about potential consequences to its actions, noting that Shuqayr could file and even win a lawsuit if he can prove that he was held accountable without an official investigation. The Cabinet was also worried about how to respond if the general reported to work the next day in defiance of its decision.

INCREASED MINIMUM WAGE
BY 50 PERCENT

¶12. (C) Mitri confirmed that the Cabinet voted to increase the minimum wage by 50 percent, which is greater than what is acceptable to the business community, he noted, but short of what is demanded by the General Labor Confederation. With strikes still planned for the following day, Mitri said he sensed nervousness among both the public and the security forces. They fear the strikes will turn violent, as they did in January 2007. (Note: Speaker Nabih Berri's Amal movement, Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, and Hizballah have all called on their supporters to participate in the strike. End note.)

¶13. (C) LAF Commander Michel Sleiman will be challenged by violent strikes, Mitri predicted, and the LAF morale is already quite low following the detainment of LAF officers involved in quelling the riots on January 27 of this year. Mitri explained that the Shia officer who shot the rioters went unpunished while three of his superiors, who are Christian, were detained.

STILL NO SAUDI MONEY

¶14. (C) Mitri lamented that the GOL still had not received the promised \$1 billion central bank deposit, despite what he noted were strong, supportive remarks by Saudi FM Prince Saud al-Faisal. He said the GOL would welcome U.S. assistance on pushing this through.

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